Identity politics: Exploring Georgian foreign policy behavior

Kornely Kakachia[*], Salome Minesashvili

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, 1 Chavchavadze Ave, 0179 Tbilisi, Georgia

A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper analyses the extent to which Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy orientation stems from ideas and identity rather than from materialist and systemic factors alone. Finding such narrow approaches insufficient for explaining small state behavior, and drawing on liberal and constructivist approaches to international relations theory, the article argues that Georgia's foreign policy orientation has a strong basis in the widespread ideological perception amongst the local political elite that Georgia "belongs" in the West. Based on this theoretical framework, this paper provides a historical overview of Georgia's foreign policy, tracing the evolution of Georgia's identity from seeing itself as "Christian" in contrast to its Islamic neighbors, to identifying as European in contrast to a modern, Russian "other". As Georgia attempts to construct a collective international identity, the devotion to the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration as a "sacred destiny" amongst the country's elite has significant foreign policy implications. This article overviews the current challenges and dilemmas of self-identification and investigates the roles that national identity and the prevailing "European" identity play in Georgia's quest for "desovietization".

1. Introduction

The idea that ideology is a factor in foreign policy is nothing new. Indeed, it has been said "that ideology has played an important part in modern international relations is generally taken for granted" (Fawn, 2006, p.7). There are few places where this is more true than in the relatively new states of the former Soviet Union. These states' propensity to internal crisis and ideological flux combined with the ongoing process of nation and state-building, "have led to a powerful role of ideas, identity and symbols" (Jones, 2004, p. 85) in this region. So it is therefore the case that structural and material theories of international relations often prove insufficient for explaining small states' foreign policy behavior. Embracing the idea that "foreign policy expresses not only what one wants, but also what one is" (Fuller, 2007, p. 93), this article discusses Georgia's foreign policy in the light of the politics of ideas and identity.

Due to its long-term historical experience and common cultural practices with multiple states and regions, Georgia could potentially identify itself with a range of regions. These include the post-Soviet space, the Caucasus or even the Middle East. Georgia could equally have simply avoided selecting a sole vector. However, disregarding all of these options, Georgia focused on its European identity, which became a major cultural focus of the political discourse (Jones, 2004) that gradually emerged throughout the country's troublesome history and constant struggle for survival amidst various empires. European identity is also

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: kornely.kakachia@tsu.ge (K. Kakachia), sminesashvili@gmail.com (S. Minesashvili).
Peer review under responsibility of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University.

the ticket to Euro-Atlantic integration, which has been the country's foreign policy priority for almost two decades now.

In this context, the paper examines Georgia's foreign policy through the prism of ideas and identity as major drives of its orientation. It also aims to explore the mechanisms through which ideas and identity find influence on foreign policy decision-making and behavior. Referring to concepts such as the liberal idea of 'social order' and the constructivist approach to identity, this paper argues that a state's foreign policy preferences can be traced to how the society in question defines itself in relation to others. This identity is in turn defined in relation to social orders within states. Therefore, states tend to define external allies and enemies based on the perceived compatibility of their social orders.

The paper[1] overviews theoretical propositions on the role of identity in foreign policy and suggests an overarching framework. By applying existing theoretical approaches, this inquiry provides a historical review of Georgia's identity formation and the dominant factors in its construction. Consequently, it analyses the origins of Georgia's "European" identity, which prevails in Georgian foreign policy and test the efficacy of an identity-based approach vis-à-vis alternative explanations, thus demonstrating the leading role of identity in foreign policy orientation.

2. Theoretical framework and methodology

The article places itself within a literature that refers to factors such as social order and ideas in the analysis of foreign policy choices by small states. For this purpose, this inquiry explores aspects of liberal theory (Moravcsik, 1997; Owen, 2011; Skidmore, 1997a, 1997b) that trace foreign policy preferences to the character of a state's underlying social orders and constructivism with its notion of ideas and identity. Both of these approaches often refer to the shortcomings of materialist theories, particularly in the case of explaining the foreign policy alignment of small states.

Neorealist approaches largely fall into the latter category. In the case of weak states, balance of power theory suggests that they will either exhibit balancing behavior against the most powerful or join with the powerful state — bandwagoning (Jervis & Snyder, 1991; Kaufman, 1992; Labs, 1992; Walt, 1987). Stephen Walt's (1987) revision of the realist theory suggests that states balance not against the most powerful, but against the most threatening and that threat perceptions are impacted by geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions. However, when applied to the post-Soviet states, structural realism finds little room for explaining some of the anomalies of both bandwagoning and balancing (Miller, 2006; Wohlforth, 2004). Similarly, this approach fails to explain why

Georgia maintained its pro-Western foreign policy orientation after the 2008 war with Russia when it became clear that the West was not willing to play a balancing role (Gvalia, Siroky, Lebanidze, & Iashvili, 2013). The logical neorealist response to this situation would be to bandwagon with Russia but this did not occur. Moreover, even though in Walt's theory, purpose is considered along with power, Walt still does not offer a compelling explanation as to why a state can form antagonistic intentions towards other states (Skidmore, 1997b, p. 232). Economic dependence theory also fails to explain the Georgian case as Georgia further distanced itself from Russia after the imposition of an economic embargo in 2006 despite its high economic dependence on its northern neighbor.

This paper argues that we need to look beyond systemic factors to explain cases like this and look at the more fundamental sources of foreign policy preferences. This is where ideas in relation to state social orders start to matter. A brief literature review reveals that the importance of ideology and identity in foreign policy orientation has been emphasized by many in the past.

For Moravcsik (1997), it is the configuration of state preferences that matters most in world politics rather than the configuration of capabilities as claimed by realism: "societal ideas, interests and institutions influence state behavior by shaping state preferences that is the fundamental social purposes underlying the strategic calculations of governments". In the same vein, whilst discussing various cases of regime promotion in the world, Owen (2011) accords a major role to ideologies behind state intentions. Rejecting approaches that merely concentrate on material interests, he argues that state leaders promote regimes based on the interests of specific ideologies thus equating regime promotion to "ideological polarization". David Skidmore (1997a) uses the idea of social orders to analyze foreign policy: "state behavior is a function of interests and purposes generated by the broader social orders in which states are embedded" (p. 3). Skidmore, rejects the assumption that state preferences are solely conditioned by inter-state competition but rather "socially constructed in a fluid environment" (p. 4). This makes the international system a field of competing social orders rather than states. Interests and power are structured in the social order by the following components: "political regimes (institutions), dominant ideological systems (ideas) and structures of economic production and distribution (socio-economic interests)" (p. 4). In foreign policy, the degree of compatibility between social orders is what defines enmity and friendship between states. Skidmore proposes that "conflict stems first and foremost from qualitative differences in the purposes of such actors and in their visions of the preferred domestic and international order" (1997b, p. 181).

Even though ideational liberalism stresses the importance of ideas in terms of state conflict and cooperation, it does not trace their origins (Moravcsik, 1997). This is where constructivism can further enrich our analysis of the effect of identity-based preferences on foreign policy, more specifically through the idea of the self/other nexus. Based on the proposition that "social threats are constructed, not natural" (Wendt, 1999, p. 405), identity and perceived